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ATTACKS ON LINCOLN AND HIS CABINET*

JOHN S. P. TATLOCK

In a generation which has canonized Lincoln, and puts the faces of his cabinet members on postage stamps and greenbacks, few people realize the full extent of the criticism and nervous impatience on the part of leading men and newspapers through which he and they passed. At such a distance of time, one forgets the personal hostility and worse toward Lincoln himself, and the various factions in the North, especially those which denied the wisdom or the timeliness of emancipating the slaves and made charges of radicalism and vacillation regardless of the main issue, the preservation of the Union. More or less of this was inevitable, and some of it may have been excusable at such close

*Early in 1918, about the middle of our late war, criticism of various departments of the Federal government for their measures and methods reached a climax. President Wilson himself did not escape. Several persons independently perceived the illumination to be gained from looking back at an earlier crisis. It would help everybody to see this criticism in a right perspective, and those who were being assailed would be interested to see to what an extent the most revered figure in American history had had the experiences they were having. Biographies of Lincoln and histories of the Civil War have little to say on the subject and give very little detail, though American historians are aware of course of the general facts. Accordingly, the Assistant Attorney-General drew up a highly interesting record of attacks on Lincoln, drawing his material chiefly from the *Congressional Globe* (the predecessor of the *Congressional Record*). He sent it to the President, and in a letter of thanks Mr. Wilson, who has some repute as an American historian, expressed himself as amazed at what he had just read. Secondly, several writers contributed a short leaflet on the subject to the series published by the League for National Unity. This league, with headquarters in New York, and with Cardinal Gibbons as president, was founded to combat attempts at disunion, especially, it would seem, on the part of those unfriendly to one or another of the allied powers. This leaflet was based largely on material previously published in biographies, etc. Thirdly, one of the Assistant Secretaries of War asked another person to put together something on the subject, though he had few of the qualifications, except good will, for writing on remoter points in American history. This, too, went to the President as well as to one of the members of the Cabinet. The materials were drawn largely from contemporary newspapers and from the *Congressional Globe*, with use also of published reminiscences, biographies of Lincoln, and the like.

range. But looking back now, we seem to hear in Congress, in the press, in the speeches and letters of prominent men, a series of screams, bellows, and hisses whenever anything went wrong, and often when a new policy was adopted or not adopted.

Especially after the Union reverse at Fredericksburg in December, 1862, people looked around for someone to blame, and struck blindly at the Cabinet, though Lincoln's poise and adroitness finally prevented its being sacrificed. Senator Grimes of Iowa moved a demand for the resignation of Seward, Secretary of State, now regarded as the strongest man in the Cabinet, and the Senate finally passed a resolution that the Cabinet ought to be reorganized. Seward was attacked in the Senate on the ground that "his influence encouraged the irresolution and inaction of the President in regard to men and measures." There was clamor in the newspapers. The New York *World* of December 21, 1862, said, "It is safe to say that the country is substantially unanimous in the opinion that there ought to be a change in the Cabinet." A few days before, the New York *World* had cried that the Ship of State was "in the hands of chattering idiots and blind blundering imbeciles, driving straight on upon the breakers and quicksands, while the crew, the stoutest and most faithful that ever trod deck, are compelled to look passively on." The New York *Herald* thought "it has become abundantly manifest, however, that we have nothing to expect from the present radical and blundering managers of this war in the Cabinet and in Congress; nothing better than great disasters and exhausting defeats in exchange for small successes in unimportant localities." Even the temperate *Independent*, then a religious weekly, founded and edited by Henry Ward Beecher, believed "Mr. Lincoln has not had a strong Cabinet. The members of it have not been united in aims and influence. The President has not had power to *maintain discipline* nor to give unity and energy to his Bureaus." As often, the faultfinders contradicted each other; at a caucus of the House of Representatives in 1863, it was said that the President "prided him-

self on having a divided Cabinet, so that he could play one against the other." There was a great outcry that Lincoln was not calling the really strong and competent men of the country to his side. The *World* bitterly attacked Lincoln, Halleck (the General-in-Chief), and Stanton (Secretary of War and the second of the President's strong men) "whose selfishness, whose incompetency, whose recklessness, and whose ambition have brought our grief upon us," and entreated the President to cut loose from his earlier advisers and "call to his Cabinet and aid, the ablest, bravest, and best men of the nation." In the view of the New York *Tribune*, "Nor is it easy to understand how, under the circumstances, any member can consent to remain. The wiser course, therefore, would seem to be that the President should call new men altogether to his side to aid him by their counsels." The New York *Herald* believed, "The country now demands of him that amiability shall give way to resolution, and that the malign influences around him, which have brought upon the national cause all its disasters and disappointments, shall be discarded and turned adrift." "Able men, commanding the confidence of the country, must take the places of the blundering fanatics and scheming politicians who distract the counsels of the Cabinet, and the places, too, of the incompetent martinets of the War Office."

The War Department (and sometimes the Navy Department) came in for particular attack. The New York papers denounced with special venom "this policy of the War Department of frittering and dribbling our overwhelming warlike forces and resources away in secondary enterprises." "The patience of the people with regard to the disorganizing abolition faction of Congress, and its blundering tools in the Cabinet is nearly exhausted." To quote another (with its portentous style), "There stands his Secretary of War, an upstart in public life, with neither knowledge nor experience, yet full of pretension and impatience, alike puzzle-headed and pragmatical . . . a mischief-maker and a marplot from the beginning. There stands the Secretary of the Navy, venerable in years, gentle at heart, mild in manners, admirably

qualified to do the needful for a boarding-school—but as for his capacity to do the needful in these dread times on the broad ocean—go read it in the flaming tracks of the *Sumter* and the *Alabama*.” From the first, when the War Department was being criticized and investigated, Lincoln saw, as a biographer says, “what the public refused to see, that ‘to bring the War Department up to the standard of the times, and work an army of 500,000 with machinery adapted to a peace establishment of 12,000, is no easy task.’ ”

Lincoln was much criticized for the generals he appointed. The South was fortunate from the first in having such skilful leaders as Lee and Stonewall Jackson, against whom the earlier Union leaders seemed impotent, slow, and even half-hearted. Horace Greeley, the domineering editor of the New York *Tribune*, wailed to a friend “that Lincoln—who seemed to be his own war minister—had shown a remarkable talent at putting the wrong men in the right places; . . . and had given them magnificent armies only to be slaughtered.” At times the President’s foes were they of his own household. Chase, the able but ambitious Secretary of the Treasury, wrote: “Then we have placed and continued in command generals who have never manifested the slightest sympathy with our cause, as related to the controlling question of slavery. These naturally have never been more than half in earnest. In addition to this, there has been enormous waste and profusion growing out of high pay and excessive indulgence. All these causes tend to demoralization, and we are demoralized. I cannot go into particulars, but the instances abound.” He wrote again and again in this style. To a senator, for instance, in September, 1862: “It is painful, however, to hear complaints of remissness, delays, discords, dangers, and feel that there must be grounds for such complaints, and know, at the same time, that one has no power to remedy the evils complained of, and yet be thought to have.” Even General Grant, who was to lead the Union armies to final victory, did not escape: “Because I would not divulge my ultimate

plans to visitors, they pronounced me idle, incompetent, and unfit to command men in an emergency, and clamored for my removal. They were not to be satisfied, many of them, with my simple removal, but named who my successor should be."

The censorship was not spared, though even the *New York Herald*, which was given to assailing Lincoln and all his works, totally denied the justice of the attacks on it. The President's strong enemies in the Senate particularly resented the censorship. Senator Grimes in May, 1862, blamed him not only for lacking a clear policy but for keeping the people in the dark. The powerful senator from Maine, Fessenden, denounced Stanton's censorship of the telegraph as an "organized system of lying."

When there was nothing particular to say, general incompetence and failure were charged all around. Said a Representative in a speech in the House early in 1863: "The war for the Union is, in your hands, a most bloody and costly failure. The President confessed it on the 22nd of September, solemnly, officially, and under the broad seal of the United States. And he has now repeated the confession." A knot of politicians in 1864, as the President's first term neared its close, tried to boom Secretary Chase, not without his own connivance, for the presidency. To this end a confidential circular was sent about. Its authors "conscientiously believe that the interests of the country and of freedom demand a change in favor of vigor and purity and nationality. . . . Even were the reelection of Mr. Lincoln desirable, it is practically impossible against the union of influences which will oppose him. . . . Should he be reelected, his manifest tendency toward compromises and temporary expedients of policy will become stronger during a second term than it has been in the first, and the cause of human liberty and the dignity and honor of the nation suffer proportionately." William Lloyd Garrison, the apostle of Negro emancipation, though less violent at this time than some other critics, damned with faint praise and less faint blame: "I do not know that some margin of

allowance may not be made even for the Administration. . . . Nevertheless, I think the Administration is unnecessarily timid and not undeserving of rebuke."

The general hostility and contempt for Lincoln, among many who ought to have better known the man who was dying daily for them, almost passes belief. The high priests of the people and their adherents smote him with the palms of their hands and spat upon him. To some near-sighted eyes his uncouthness hid all else. In a crowd in Ohio listening to a seditious speech from a member of Congress, there was a shout: "Jeff Davis was a gentleman, and that was more than the President was." J. D. Cox, one of the best generals and most competent historians of the Civil War, tells in his *Reminiscences* that, though the mass of the people knew him better, "the belittling view of Lincoln was the common one among public men in Washington," and that among the epithets hurled by Lincoln's opponents, "baboon" was one of the mildest. Even Secretary Stanton, in 1861 before he was appointed to the Cabinet, shocked General McClellan by calling Lincoln the "original gorilla," and never gave the Administration and the Republican Party "credit for honesty or patriotism, and very seldom for any ability." R. H. Dana, prominent in Massachusetts, and still known to boys (and men) as author of *Two Years before the Mast*, wrote from Washington: "The lack of respect for the President is unconcealed." "As to the politics of Washington, the most striking thing is the absence of personal loyalty to the President." "He is an unutterable calamity to us where he is," was Dana's own view.

Sometimes the charges against him offset each other, just as British and German charges against American neutrality did in 1916. To some Lincoln seemed weak, to others a tyrant. W. L. Garrison, and even moderate men, and moderate papers like the Boston *Evening Journal*, blamed him for weakness and vacillation; says the latter (December 22, 1862): "His mind is constantly distracted by contending counsels, and his policy has, as a natural result, been wavering and in some [points] erratic. What

the country wants now is some fixed policy on the part of the President, persisted in with firmness, and supported by unity of action in the Cabinet." The New York *World*, in an editorial headed "How President Lincoln Deliberately Thwarted General McClellan," speaks of how "the stronger spirit of Stanton reasserted its ascendancy over his infirm and vacillating mind." This was the Stanton whom the same paper, less than two years before, had been for throwing out of the Cabinet as pretentious and incompetent. But in 1864, as the election approached, the *World* had political fish to fry. The same paper had scoffed at Lincoln's masterly handling of the Cabinet crisis of 1862 as "an additional proof of the weakness of his character. . . . Considering the spirit of senatorial dictation in which this cabinet crisis originated, it is not surprising that a weak man dared not put himself in their power." One who was present at a caucus of the House in 1863 exclaims: "How striking the want of a leader. The nation is without a head. . . . The true friends of the government are groping around without a leader." All this criticism strongly affected Congress.

On the other hand, what was the President but a tyrant. In September, 1863, acting by the authority of Congress, he had felt obliged to suspend the writ of habeas corpus. This measure was a swift weapon against sedition, so common among the Unionists who sympathized with slavery, or who had weakly tired of the war. The suspension of habeas corpus awakened great hostility. The Unionist General Assembly of Kentucky blamed Lincoln for this and for proclaiming martial law; so did the legislatures of Pennsylvania and New York. Other executive acts produced a like feeling, such as the Emancipation Proclamation, some thinking it tyrannical, some too early, others not early enough. A very eminent Massachusetts lawyer and jurist, B. R. Curtis, put Lincoln among "usurpers of vast powers not entrusted to them, in violation of their solemn oaths of office." Curtis thought Lincoln claimed a power over the whole American people which "would make him the absolute

master of their lives, their liberties, and their property, with power to delegate his mastership to such satraps as he might select, or as might be imposed on his credulity, or his fears." A Harvard law professor cried out in the *Boston Courier* in November, 1862: "Do you not perceive that the President is not only a monarch, but that his is an absolute, irresponsible, uncontrollable government; a perfect military despotism?" The Senate was jealous of what it thought Lincoln's usurpations, not admitting their necessity nor their constitutionality even in emergencies. Senator Wade waxed ironical at Lincoln's control over legislation (July, 1862): "We ought to have a committee to wait on the President whenever we send him a bill, to know what his royal pleasure is in regard to it." Charles Sumner, the distinguished senator from Massachusetts, spoke passionately (June 27, 1862) against transferring great war powers from Congress to the President. "Such a pretension would change the National Government from a government of law to that of a military dictator."

Some even hinted that "Honest Abe" was guilty of corruption. It is not merely that early in the war we hear of such dishonesty among government contractors as today we could hardly believe. It is not merely that in December, 1862, the *World* asked, "Can it really be, as the *Independent* and General Wilcox assert or imply, that the war is really managed by western railroad corporations and New York Steamship owners?" In September, 1864, the same paper headed an editorial, "Mr. Lincoln—Has He or Has He Not, an Interest in the Profits of Public Contracts?" and went on to intimate that he had grafted in army contracts at St. Louis. The next day, under the heading "Is Mr. Lincoln Honest?" it continued, "The greatest claim of Mr. Lincoln to the confidence and support of the people has been his reputation for honesty. Strip him of this, and there is nothing left but vacillation, imbecility, and obscene jesting." It goes on with half a dozen charges against Lincoln's honesty.

The hostility and want of appreciation for the President is typified in the attitude of one person. This was a strenuous, self-confident, and very influential man, who in his time had served his countrymen well; picturesque in his face and his attire, wholly without humor, but adept at coining catch phrases which fitted everybody's tongue; a man entirely out of office, who now wielded much less commanding power than formerly, but unwilling to face the setting of his own sun, and still flourishing a stick in his newspaper columns; a man who felt he knew just how affairs of state should be conducted, and was vexed because he was not consulted. It is needless to say that this was Horace Greeley, editor of the New York *Tribune*. He tried to dictate to the President as to the time of proclaiming emancipation, as to the time for opening peace negotiations with envoys from the South, as to his choice of generals and of Cabinet officers. His attitude, and the sort of flattery he received from his subordinates, may be seen from these recollections, by one of them, James R. Gilmore: "I admitted the conduct of the war had been bad. . . . But if he [Greeley] felt sure that Rosecrans was the man to manage the war, I was confident Mr. Lincoln would give him the War Department, and also call Walker back from Europe to take the place of Seward." . . . "I closed what I had to say with 'but Mr. Greeley, we are obliged to have Lincoln for another two years—can't you bring your mind to the point of going to him, and demanding that he shall put competent men into his Cabinet?' He answered that he could not—that Lincoln had given no heed to the few suggestions he had already made, and he had shown a like disregard to every recommendation of the prominent men of his party." Greeley worked his hardest against Lincoln's renomination (though he did not go the length of showing willingness to run against him), and we are not surprised to learn that he thought, "Should the country survive Lincoln's term of office, it would, were he reëlected, of a certainty go to destruction. This was the opinion of every prominent Republican he had conversed with on the subject,

and they all thought the one hope of its final salvation lay in defeating a reëlection of Lincoln."

Through it all Lincoln went his anxious, patient, self-forgetful, shrewd, open-minded, far-seeing way. He listened to all men, kept his own counsel, formed his own impressions, bided his own time, acted as the Constitution and necessity dictated. Through all the clamor as to his lack of a policy, he held without swerving to one policy alone, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union." He saw that to save democracy in the world from destruction from within, or from without, the country must be united in pursuit of military victory.